

## KATHARINE DREXEL: LEARNING TO LOVE THE POOR

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*Although born into privilege, Katharine Drexel was blessed with parents, siblings, friends, and spiritual guides who kept her rooted in a deep, Eucharistic faith. Responding to the needs of the poor was a responsibility of the rich, and Katharine learned this value at the hands of her parents at an early age. With the good counsel of popes and bishops, family and friends, she ultimately used her great family wealth to provide education for the poor.*

In a Christmas letter to her mother, written in French, 9-year-old Katharine Drexel promised, “I am trying to study hard so that I may make my first Communion this year” (as cited in Baldwin, 2000, p. 23). Those words set forth the two great interests of Katharine Drexel’s life: education and the Blessed Sacrament. She would have to wait 2 more years for her first Communion, but the interplay of these two factors would determine her future and give a new religious congregation to the Roman Catholic Church.

### EDUCATING AN EDUCATOR

Several of her biographers have noted that Katharine Mary Drexel was born into an unusually well-educated and an unusually pious Catholic family. Five weeks after her birth on November 26, 1858, her mother Hannah Langstroth Drexel died. Katharine and her 3-year-old sister Elizabeth went to live with their aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Drexel, while their father Francis coped with his grief. Two years later, Francis married Emma Bouvier, and the couple brought the two little girls to their new home on Philadelphia’s fashionable Walnut Street. Francis was a scion of the great Drexel banking family, staunchly Catholic pillars of Philadelphia society. Katharine, Elizabeth, and their little sister Louise grew up in an atmosphere of wealth and privilege with every possible advantage.

Emma made no distinction between the children of her husband's first marriage and her own daughter, Louise; she was an equally loving mother to all three. Elizabeth began school at the nearby Convent of the Sacred Heart, but seems to have had behavior problems. Before Katharine was ready for school, the Drexels had decided to educate their daughters at home. Into the household as governess came Miss Mary Bernadette Cassidy, a remarkable young woman whose influence accounted for the fact that Katharine wrote fluently in both English and French by the age of 9. Gifted tutors instructed the girls in Latin, French, and music. Besides conventional lessons in geography and history, Francis Drexel took his family across the United States on extended vacations which made these subjects come alive.

The girls learned religion by example. Emma often took the children with her when she made visits to the Blessed Sacrament at Sacred Heart Convent. At home, there was an oratory for family and private prayer. Each business day, their father spent a half hour in private meditation thereupon returning from work. Francis Drexel sat on the board of nearly every Catholic charity in the city, where he quietly did a tremendous amount of good. Mrs. Drexel preferred a more hands on approach to helping the poor. Three afternoons a week, she opened her home to anyone in need, and with the help of a servant, and later her daughters, she dispensed a variety of practical aid. These afternoons were known as Mama's Dorcas work, after the charitable widow in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and served to impress upon the girls that wealth carried with it responsibility for those less fortunate.

Another lesson of this nature came about with the acquisition of a summer home in Torresdale, dubbed "St. Michael's." When Elizabeth was 14 and Katharine 11, their mother suggested they begin

a Sunday School for the children of the men who worked on the place....The older children were taught by Elizabeth, the youngest by Katharine....After the lessons were recited, the children were assembled around the piano in the parlor and hymns were sung. (Duffy, 1966, p. 45)

St. Michael's Sunday School became a tradition, lasting until 1888. When all of the girls reached their teens, Francis took the family on a grand tour of Europe, a trip which featured numerous churches and a private audience with the pope. Regular letters traveled back to Miss Cassidy, who corrected them and kept them to be made into a scrapbook. Part of the entertainment in Paris consisted of shopping for a wardrobe suitable for Elizabeth's debut later that year. Katharine followed her sister into Philadelphia society in January 1879. She did not pay much attention to the occasion, giving it only

one short sentence in a letter to her spiritual advisor. Bishop James O'Connor of the Omaha Diocese had been close to the family ever since he spent several years as a parish priest in Torresdale. The move to Omaha did not sever the relationship; O'Connor was to be a powerful influence on Katharine Drexel's choice of vocation.

## EVOLUTION OF A VOCATION

Katharine now joined Elizabeth on summer visits to country estates and Jersey shore homes of family friends. As always, letters went back and forth between the girls and their parents. One of Emma's letters to her daughters in August 1880 was quite different from their ordinary exchange:

Last night I had a dream in which I saw a painting of a door....It was locked. I inquired for the key and Kate informed me that the meaning of the painting was that Jesus held the key, as this was the door of His Heart, which He opened only to those who knocked and asked. (Duffy, 1966, p. 68)

Emma also shared the experience with her husband, and both pondered its meaning. Katharine's deeply pious nature was known to her parents, who thought the dream might in some way foreshadow her future.

Emma Drexel was not to see the outcome of her dream. By the time the letter was written, Emma had already been diagnosed with a terminal cancer. She suffered a slow death over a period from late 1879 till January 1883, and the family suffered with her. Following their mother's death, Francis Drexel decided to take his grief-stricken daughters to Europe once again. It was on this trip that Katharine's future was determined, though she did not know it at the time. In her letters to Bishop O'Connor, Katharine had alluded to the possibility of a religious vocation – perhaps to a contemplative community. O'Connor did not favor the idea. Instead, he promoted living a life of prayer as a layperson, combined with sponsoring good works with the share of the Drexel fortune which would fall to her. As something of a compromise, they agreed she might make a vow of virginity for a period of a year at one of the shrines on her European itinerary.

Katharine chose a shrine to the Blessed Virgin in the Church of San Marco in Venice. For the rest of her life, she kept a small prayer card with the image of that statue in her office book. Biographer Ellen Tarry, who received her high school diploma from Mother Katharine Drexel, describes the young Katharine being impressed by the Scriptural injunction, "Freely have you received; freely give," at the time of her private vow (Tarry, 2000, p. 72). However, it was not in Venice, but during a chance meeting in Rome

that the direction of that giving first took shape. The Drexels met two priests in the Eternal City whose mission was to native American tribes in the Northwest: Bishop John Seghers and Father Peter Hylebos. Listening to the pair describe the poverty of the Indians and their struggles to set up schools for them sparked in Katharine a lifelong commitment to the education of Native American peoples.

During the 1880s, former President Grant's Peace Policy for alleviating Native American poverty and educating them to live in mainstream society was still in practice. Grant had decreed in 1870 that Indian missions and schools be turned over to various religious denominations. The religious group had to build and staff the schools; the government would pay \$100 annually for each pupil. The two clerics described the difficulties they were having with construction costs and finding personnel for the Catholic mission schools. Since the Drexel family was widely known for both its wealth and charitable works, perhaps they hoped for some concrete assistance. That hope would not be disappointed; indeed, it was to be fulfilled far beyond expectation.

Shortly after returning home, Francis Drexel surprised and somewhat unnerved his daughters one evening by telling them he had just made a will that would protect them from anyone seeking to take advantage of the girls after his death. Might this act be the result of a premonition? However, before anything could go wrong, he suggested they accompany him on a business trip to the Far West. Knowing how intrigued they had been by the stories of their new friends in Rome, he promised they would visit some Indian reservations and see conditions for themselves. And so the family set out, traveling by private railroad car, in the fall of 1884. On reaching the northwestern limits of their trip, they visited a Catholic Indian mission and discovered none other than their Roman friend Father Hylebos in charge. Showing them around the as yet unfinished complex, he noted that the chapel lacked a statue of the Madonna. Katharine's first benefaction to the Indian missions was to give a considerable portion of her monthly allowance toward the purchase of a very large statue of the Virgin. Further study of the Indian situation was delayed, however, by what the girls had feared for their father.

## **THE DREXEL INHERITANCE**

Early in the winter of 1885, Francis Drexel caught a severe cold which quickly progressed to pleurisy. Just when they thought he was on the mend, Francis died quite suddenly on a Sunday morning in mid-February. After an elaborate funeral in St. Mary's Cathedral, the will was read and immediately attracted national attention. Francis had indeed protected his

daughters from any future fortune hunters. Of his \$15,500,000 estate, 10% was immediately divided among a long list of Catholic charities in the Philadelphia area. The remaining \$14,000,000 was to be held in trust for his daughters. The annual interest would be divided equally among the three girls; should any of them die, that share reverted to the survivors. No husband could touch any of the money. If all of the girls died without heirs, the principle would then be given to the same list of charities as received the initial benefaction. Francis appointed his brother Anthony, a brother-in-law, and a close family friend in the legal profession as executors (Duffy, 1966).

All of the Drexel daughters had inherited their banker father's flair for handling money, as well as his administrative skills and belief that wealth must be shared. They also embodied their mother's hands on approach to charitable concerns. At first, each of the girls focused on a different area of need, although each was directly related to education. Elizabeth planned a trade school to prepare the boys from her father's favorite orphanage for independent living. Louise would soon become interested in the work of the Josephite fathers, who devoted their energies to the education of Black Americans. As for Katharine, her direction had already been set during the previous year's western trip. She would direct her attention to the needs of Native American peoples.

Soon after their bereavement, two clerics called at the Drexel house in Philadelphia, asking to see "the Misses Drexel." Her sisters delegated Katharine to go down and meet them. The visitors turned out to be Bishop Martin Marty, O.S.B., of northern Minnesota, and Father Joseph Stephan, Director of the Catholic Bureau of Indian Missions. As they explained, Grant's Peace Policy had for all purposes been dissolved during the administration of President Chester Arthur. Religious denominations which had kept missions were on their own. Determined not to renege on their obligations to the various tribes, the two had come seeking financial help for Catholic Indian schools. They had not come in vain. Shortly after the visit, the first of a lifetime of checks was written to fund construction, maintenance, and salaries of what would be known unofficially as the Drexel Indian schools.

Before the disbursements began in earnest, the three sisters would make two journeys, in opposite directions, and under very different conditions. Following the shock of her father's death, Katharine's health deteriorated to a point which had her sisters extremely worried. They decided to visit Europe again, beginning with a famous health spa at Schwalbach, Germany. While Katharine took a 5-week cure, Elizabeth and Louise visited a series of trade schools to see how such institutions were managed, with an eye to

applying what they learned to their own projects. After Katharine emerged from the spa restored to her energetic self, the trio continued a traditional luxurious grand tour program, coming eventually to Rome and another papal audience, this time with Pope Leo XIII.

Katharine had continued to ponder in what state of life she might best serve God and the obligations of her father's legacy. Bishop O'Connor continued to discourage her from entering religious life. Before her trip, the bishop had urged her to try to find recruits in Europe to work in his Indian mission; thus far she had failed to secure any. She decided to take up the matter with the pope. Years later, in a talk given before a conference of the Catholic Students Mission Crusade, she described what happened at that meeting.

Kneeling at his feet, my girlish fancy thought that surely God's Vicar would not refuse me; so I pleaded missionary priests for Bishop O'Connor's Indians. To my astonishment, His Holiness responded "Why not, my child yourself become a missionary?" (Drexel, 1921, p. 2)

The words had an immediate physical effect on her. She described feeling weak and sick all over, and could scarcely remember leaving the Vatican. To her sisters' concern, she could make no answer; the experience had been too deep for words. She continued to ponder its meaning on the journey home, and then received further direction in the form of an invitation from Father Stephan. The Catholic Indian Bureau director invited the Drexel sisters to make an extensive tour of Indian Territory to visit his missions and see conditions for themselves. Bishop O'Connor accompanied them on a grueling 4-week journey by train, coach, buckboard, and horseback in the fall of 1887. At the Pine Bluff Agency in South Dakota, they formed a lasting friendship with Sioux chief Red Cloud – a relationship which would later save the mission there during the rebellion leading to the massacre at Wounded Knee. In the months that followed the trip, Katharine increased her financial contributions to the missions and continued to reflect on what she might do with her person to aid the cause.

Throughout 1888, Katharine exchanged letters with Bishop O'Connor again about the possibility of a religious vocation. Her director remained doubtful about Katharine's suitability for such a life until her letter of November 26. At this point, Katharine rebelled against his cautions, saying: "It appears to me that Our Lord gives me the right to choose the better part....Are you afraid to give me to Jesus Christ?" (as cited in Baldwin, 2000, p. 64). Bishop O'Connor gave in and the question moved to what kind of congregation she should consider. Rejecting some of his sugges-

tions, she specified "I want a missionary order for Indians and Colored people" (as cited in Duffy, 1966, p. 130). Katharine had by this time taken on her sister Louise's passion for the welfare of African Americans in addition to her own longstanding focus on the Indian missions. Her other main concern in choosing an order was to find a group that permitted daily Communion.

## **SISTERS OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT**

The next move was from the bishop. He later claimed that an inspiration had come to him while saying Mass; Katharine should herself found an order that would work solely with the Indians and the Colored. Both Father Stephan and Katharine's confessor, Jesuit D. J. McGoldrick, heartily agreed. The problem lay in convincing Katharine. She still longed for a contemplative life, and thought she lacked the necessary virtues to be a foundress. At the close of another letter to O'Connor, she voiced her dilemma: "I know Our Lord wished for souls, but does He wish me to ask Him for them in prayer and contemplation, or does He wish me to found an order?" (as cited in Duffy, 1966, p. 135). Her three clerical advisors prevailed. Arrangements were made for Katharine to undergo novitiate training with the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh; at its successful completion, the new order would be launched.

Worries about leaving her sisters were eliminated when Louise married Colonel Edward Morrell and Elizabeth announced her engagement to attorney Walter Smith. As for the sisters themselves, Elizabeth put it best in a letter to a friend: "Let me assure you that on Katharine's account we feel nothing but tranquility and contentment" (as cited in van Balen Holt, 2002, p. 66). The media took another approach. Philadelphia's Public Ledger declared:

A sensation has been created by the announcement that Miss Kate Drexel...has decided to become a Nun....The strange spectacle will be presented of one of America's greatest heiresses laying aside all that so many thousands live for and adopting a new life as opposite as can be well imagined from that which she might be supposed to favor. (as cited in van Balen Holt, 2002, p. 66)

Katharine Drexel entered the Mercy novitiate May 8, 1889, and soon laid to rest any fears that she might not be able to handle that "opposite" life. A novitiate companion wrote of those early days: "The first thing that impressed me was the whole-hearted generosity with which Sister Katharine responded to every demand of her new life" (as cited in Duffy, 1966, p. 141).

Likewise, her novice mistress, Mother Inez Casey, remarked to a candidate for the new community: "I have eighty in my novitiate and none can approach, much less equal, Sister M. Katharine in humility" (as cited in Duffy, 1966, p. 157).

However, before that novitiate was completed with Katharine's first profession of vows, she was to suffer two stunning losses. The first was the death of Bishop O'Connor in 1890. Deprived of her long-time guide, Katharine feared she could not go through with the new order. To her rescue came the Archbishop of Philadelphia, Patrick J. Ryan, who asked: "If I share the burden with you, if I help you, can you go on?" (as cited in van Balen Holt, 2002, p. 72). Katharine gratefully accepted, and Ryan became trusted friend and spiritual father.

The second sorrow was perhaps even deeper and more of a shock. Before her first anniversary, Elizabeth Drexel Smith died in childbirth. However, with the help of Archbishop Ryan and the support of equally grief-stricken Louise and Ned Morrell, Katharine went on. The Morrells helped to locate a site for the new motherhouse, 19 miles outside Philadelphia in the town of Andalusia (later Cornwells Heights). It was to be named Saint Elizabeth's, in honor of her sister's patron. The building was nowhere near completion when Katharine pronounced her vows and became Mother Katharine Drexel. Determined not to wait any longer, Mother Katharine, accompanied by Mother Inez who was loaned to the new congregation for its founding period, moved into the old family summer home in Torresdale and sent for the 10 novices and a postulant who formed the pioneer Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for the Indians and the Colored. The name had been chosen by Bishop O'Connor with Katharine's full approval. One of the buildings on the grounds became Holy Family House (later Holy Providence House) for the shelter and schooling of 15 orphaned Black children. Dressed in their new habits for the first time, the sisters attended the cornerstone laying for Saint Elizabeth's, unaware that some sticks of dynamite had been found nearby. As would happen all too frequently in the future, some neighbors were not happy about the sisters' focus on "the Indians and the Colored."

They moved into St. Elizabeth's on December 3, 1892. Holy Providence School became a laboratory for training the new teachers, and a request for the community to staff St. Stephen Indian Mission in Wyoming arrived that very first year. Archbishop Ryan refused permission to go saying the sisters were as yet too young and inexperienced in the religious life to take on a distant mission. Deeply disappointed, the sisters redoubled their efforts to become competent teachers, while Mother Katharine continued to grow in her dual role of religious superior and administrator of the income

from her inheritance.

The longed for first mission came about in June 1894, when nine sisters left to staff St. Catherine School in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Mother Katharine had founded the institution among the Pueblos of New Mexico before her entrance, but it had closed when teachers were no longer available. The missionaries left in two groups, and between the departures, Mother Katharine traveled to Virginia, where Louise Morrell had opened St. Emma's Industrial School for Black Boys. The Blessed Sacrament Sisters would establish a complementary institution for girls, St. Francis de Sales, on the James River in the town of Rock Castle. Later, the foundation would become a high school and would graduate one of Mother Drexel's biographers, Ellen Tarry.

With both these endeavors flourishing, Mother Katharine turned her attention to the Navajos of Arizona. There was no Catholic mission in Navajo country at the time. First, Mother had to recruit priests, and found them among the Franciscans. She paid all the construction costs and agreed to give the missionaries an annual salary. The mission was to be called St. Michael's. Only when the Fathers' project was well under way did she begin to plan a school to be run by the Blessed Sacrament Sisters. Led by Mother Katharine herself, who took advantage of the trip to visit a number of the Drexel Indian schools she had funded, the sisters arrived in October of 1902. A boarding school opened on December 3, 1902, with 47 pupils, whose parents came with them and closely observed how the sisters operated for 2 weeks before telling the superior, Mother Evangelist, that they were satisfied and would leave their children. The word must have gone out, for the following year registration doubled, soon reaching the school's capacity of 150. In later years, with the advent of buses, day students were added, as well as new buildings, till St. Michael's enrolled 460 in elementary and high school divisions (Duffy, 1966).

In the new century, Mother Katharine directed more of her attention to the education of African American children. Her sister once remarked that while Katharine had "some hundred thousand Indians...I have ten million Negroes" (as cited in Tarry, 2000, p. 109). As early as her postulant days, Katharine had given a \$120,000 donation toward what became St. Peter Claver Parish for the Colored in Philadelphia. The early Blessed Sacrament Sisters taught Sunday school there, and eventually Mother funded a parochial school staffed by the Notre Dame Sisters. As African Americans migrated by the thousands to the big cities of the North, Mother Katharine duplicated her first effort over and over again to help in the building of parishes and schools, and as her community increased, she staffed many of those institutions with fully qualified teachers.

But it was in the strictly segregated South that her efforts drew the most attention – and opposition. It began in Nashville during June 1904, when Bishop Thomas Byrne asked for a school for the African American children in his diocese. He had located a property, but knew the owner would be adverse to any such use. It was purchased secretly through an agent; however, when the plans for an African American school became known, the former owner went so far as to resurrect an old city map which showed a street running through it, and tried to have that street put in so as to ruin the property. He failed. Mother serenely ignored the opposition and Immaculate Mother Academy and Industrial School opened September 5, 1905.

Louisiana was perhaps the most fertile ground for Mother Katharine's work in the Deep South. When the all Black Southern University in New Orleans was run out of town by hostile neighbors, a Josephite priest contacted Mother Katharine with a proposition to take over the empty buildings and reopen them as a Catholic college for Black students. Again, property was acquired by an agent, this time at public auction, and plans went quietly forward to a point of no return in 1915, before angry neighbors discovered that there would be another Black educational institution in their midst. The result was first a normal school to train Black teachers, then a 4-year college program, and finally a full-fledged university, especially renowned for its school of pharmacy. It was called Xavier University. Along with being the only Black Catholic university in the country, it featured an integrated faculty and the sight of White sisters sitting beside Black students at a time when all Southern classrooms were strictly segregated. The young sisters in those classes were evidence of Mother's concern that every Blessed Sacrament sister be fully qualified. In addition to the normal school at Xavier, her sisters attended a number of other institutions and were among the first to take advantage of the Sisters College at The Catholic University of America,

After the success in New Orleans, Mother took to the bayou country at the urging of Father Jean Marie Girault de la Corgnais, a French nobleman turned missionary to Louisiana's poorest citizens. He showed her schools that were shacks, children who attended only 1 month a year, and explained that there was a critical shortage of teachers. The Drexel legacy then built a school at City Price, the first in a series of 24 scattered throughout rural Louisiana. Many would be staffed by Xavier graduates.

The pattern of the bayou schools was duplicated from the Carolinas and Georgia inland to Texas. Inevitably, the sisters ran up against the Ku Klux Klan. One such episode happened in Beaumont, Texas. In Mother's own words:

They posted that if the Colored continued to worship there [the Colored Church], they would dynamite the church....I telegraphed that I would bear the expense of two watchmen....The priest held his ground and so did the Sisters and the Congregation. (as cited in van Balen Holt, 2002, p. 98)

Klan tactics never did succeed in driving the Blessed Sacrament Sisters from any of their missions.

During the early years of infiltrating the Deep South, there was the additional concern of getting both the congregation and its rule formally approved by the Vatican. Although several priests gave valuable assistance, the best advice came from Mother Francis Xavier Cabrini, foundress of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Having successfully negotiated the Roman bureaucracy herself, she told Mother Katharine to "Go to Rome yourself" (as cited in Baldwin, 2000, p. 131). At first hesitant to take the time off and bear the expense, Archbishop Ryan convinced her to take the advice. Louise Morrell covered first class passage for Mother Katharine and her companion, Mother James Otis, in May 1907. The necessary work took 2 months, but the pair returned jubilant with the treasured Decree of Approbation.

With all worries about the status of her congregation resolved, Mother resumed her dual role as missionary superior and administrator of her portion of the Drexel inheritance. While best known for the work of the Blessed Sacrament Sisters and her funding of Drexel schools, Mother Katharine answered numerous requests to help other people's projects. Her only stipulation was that the donation directly benefit the education of either Black or Native American students. Typical of her bequests was money for books and classroom equipment at a tiny Black school in the parish of St. Mark in Newton Grove, North Carolina. Dominican Sister Josita Cavagnaro was forced by local prejudice to live apart from her companions with the Black children she was teaching. The sisters and the parish were poverty-stricken; the school, first of its kind in the area, would not have survived without Mother Katharine's regular checks.

The list of Drexel projects, large and small, is staggering. After her death in 1955, it was estimated that in her lifetime, Katharine gave away approximately \$20 million. However, as Bishop (later Cardinal) Richard Cushing wrote in a tribute for the community's golden jubilee booklet, "Her greatest contribution was the sacrifice of herself" (as cited in Duffy, 1966, p. 361). Hurd (2002), in a doctoral dissertation on Katharine Drexel's theology of education concurred, and linked that giving to the Blessed Sacrament for which the community was named: "Her theology

of education was the spirit of the Eucharist, the total gift of self" (p. 38). In her later years, she received honorary degrees and numerous awards; yet, Sister Tomasita Daley said at the time of her canonization, "there would Mother Katharine be, patching her stockings in the evening alongside the rest of us" (as cited in Clines, 2000, p. A22). After heart problems forced her retirement from active ministry in 1935, the doctor mandated a wheelchair. Mother Katharine refused to sanction buying one; instead, "Men who worked at the convent ended up making her a wheelchair out of two seats from the auditorium. Asked where the wheels for the chair came from....If they bought them, nobody dared tell her" (Schemo, 2000, p. A9).

## THE DREAM COMES TO FRUITION

Sister Tomasita described tens of thousands of graduates – many of them teachers to the next generation of Blacks and Native Americans. Mother Katharine had once urged the sisters at St. Michael's to do all in their power to keep the children interested in school. "We want older boys and girls because they are the future teachers" (as cited in Hurd, 2002, p. 136). How delighted she would have been to hear the Pueblo tribal leader, Joe Abeyta, Sr., when he traveled east to pray and put sacred corn pollen on her crypt: "Mother Katharine, you loved me, you came to my house. You have taught us well and we are ready to lead" (as cited in Clines, 2000, p. A22).

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